

March 27, 2006

Panel reviews agency decision on old Nevada mine

By BRENDAN RILEY - ASSOCIATED PRESS

CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP) - The Nevada Environmental Commission plans a hearing Wednesday on claims by a mining industry watchdog group that a state agency failed to prevent pollution from a shutdown gold mine in Elko County from reaching the Humboldt River.

The commission will hear an appeal filed by Great Basin Mine Watch that challenges the state Environmental Protection Division's oversight of the old Big Springs Mine, owned by the AngloGold Ashanti corporation.

The open pit mine, which hasn't operated for 10 years, is one of many holdings of AngloGold Ashanti, a global company with assets in key gold producing regions in ten countries.

The state division issued a permit last July that authorized permanent closure of the mine about 60 miles north of Elko, but Great Basin Mine Watch said the division failed to deal with continuing discharges of polluted water from the mine that runs into the north fork of the Humboldt.

"It's been a decade now that they have been illegally polluting into the Humboldt River," said Elyssa Rosen, senior policy adviser for Great Basin Mine Watch. She added the pollutants include elevated levels of salt, selenium, arsenic and manganese - all toxic to aquatic life in high concentrations.

The north fork of the Humboldt cuts through the Toiyabe National Forest in the Independence Range, a popular hunting and fishing area. Fish in the river include the Lahontan cutthroat trout, a threatened species.

In advance of the hearing, which could run into Thursday, the state division moved last week to block Great Basin Mine Watch from appealing on grounds the 2005 Legislature passed a law eliminating public interest groups from filing such appeals.

William Frey, deputy attorney general for the division, said the law states that an appeal can be filed in such cases only if the appellant has a financial stake in the outcome.

"Why would an environmental protection agency want to bar citizen groups from the environmental policy process?" said Nicole Rinke, attorney for the Western Mining Action Project which is working with Great Basin Mine Watch to stop the pollution from the Big Springs Mine.

"This move reveals a strong industry bias at NDEP, and an effort to avoid public scrutiny of the poor job the agency has done protecting water quality from mining operations," Rinke added.

Article Posted at:

<http://www.lasvegassun.com/sunbin/stories/nevada/2006/mar/27/032710868.html>